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ABSTRACT

Designed to provide information about reading in New Zealand, this report offers an overview of theory and practice in that area. Among the topics discussed are: the current concern about reading standards; developmental reading; effective methods of reading instruction; research into the nature of the reading process; preparation of teachers of reading, including four inservice programs; and the role of parents in reading instruction. (FL)

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A survey of our theory and practice

John Penton

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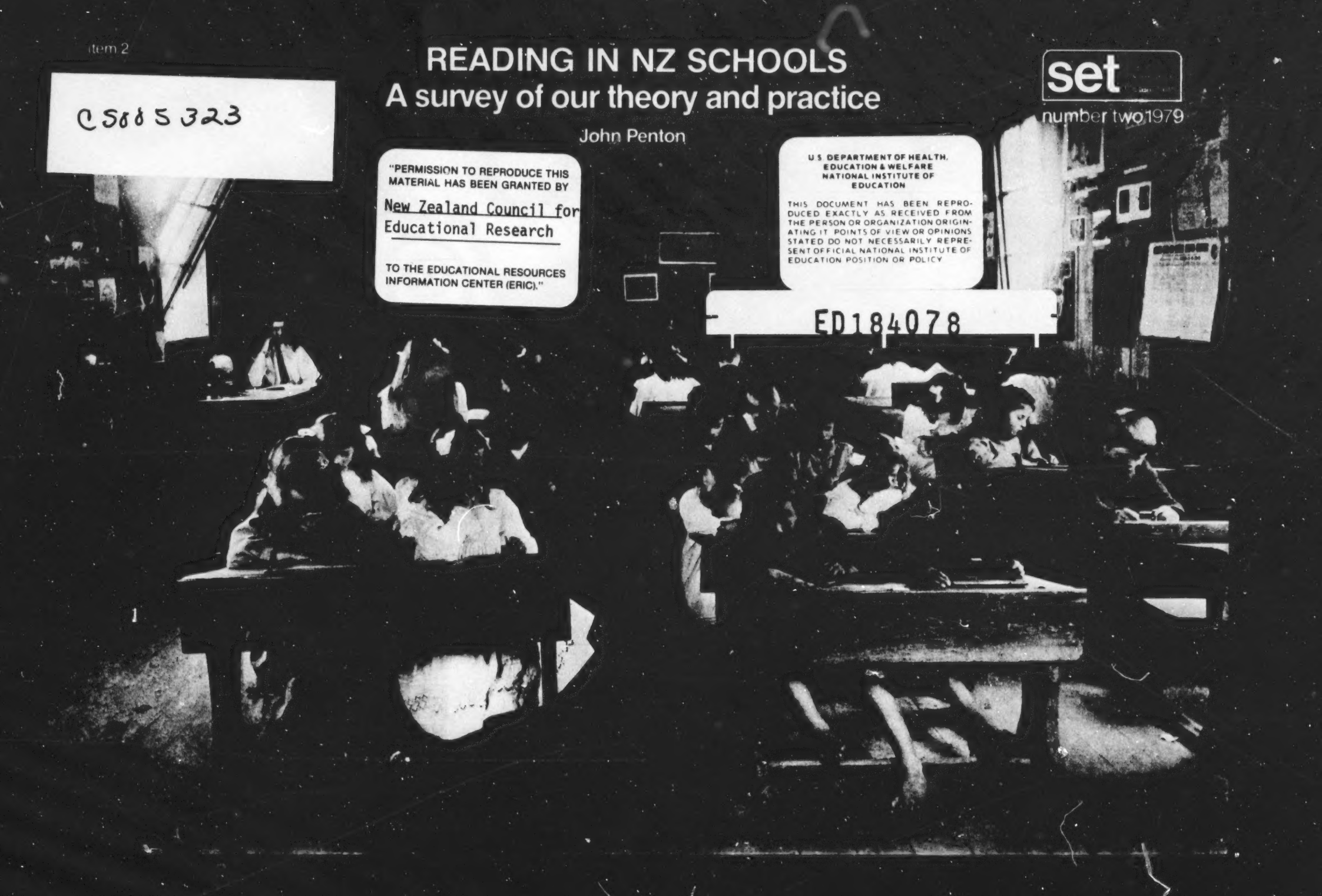

Reading in NZ Schools

A survey of our theory and practice.

By John Penton

Introduction

To read well and widely is a central objective of formal education. People who cannot read are seen to be at a crippling disadvantage, personally, educationally, and vocationally. Public concern is often expressed about standards of reading attainment.

How do children learn to get a message from print? And, how do they become competent lifelong readers?

A neutral observer free of all preconceptions and prejudices about reading who was to set sail upon the ocean of theory, research and practice armed with these questions would be very soon swamped in complexity and controversy. Yet somehow, everyone involved in the reading acquisition and development business — researchers, theorists, teachers of teachers, parents and publishers, but above all teachers — needs to have some distillation of the ferment of theory, research, traditional wisdom and new knowledge to use in effective action with pupils and print.

There have been great advances in knowledge in the past twenty years but New Zealand teachers have not had to wait for the findings of overseas experts. If anything, the opposite. A remarkably consistent body of theory and practice has evolved in this country since the 1940s which has enabled us to indulge in a process of fine-tuning rather than major re-building. For this we have to thank those individuals on the 'growing edge'. We have been fortunate with our leaders in the field of reading. Evidence suggests that we are doing very well — our reading comprehension standards are amongst the highest in the world — but we can do better. And the key to doing better is simply to give all teachers access to the most up-to-date and consistent theory and practice about developmental reading.

Key Ideas

First, some reference points. New Zealanders have a perennial public concern about reading standards. There seems to be a pervasive, almost neurotic, anxiety about reading. Such a state of affairs can have a negative effect on many parents, children and teachers. One hears the phrases, 'reading problem' and 'remedial reading' too often. Interacting with print should always be, at the least, interesting, and at the most, a deeply fulfilling experience. Anxiety about reading in the classroom and in the community is likely to be counter-productive. In the process of becoming a reader a child should enjoy the same kind of intense personal satisfaction as a youngster who learns to swim. Experience with books which grip and hold the reader, delight and enthral, move to laughter and tears, heighten and increase understanding of the world and the human condition — all these should be part of the regular fare of learning at every level of the school. If reading is a chore, a dull daily ritual with little point or satisfaction, then our conscientious efforts to teach reading will be ineffective. One eminent commentator on reading in the United States, Charlotte Huck, asserts that, 'In our attempts to guarantee reading for all, we have destroyed reading for many.' Her remark is partly a reaction to the preoccupation with narrowly conceived and highly structured reading programmes which have developed in her country and which are very different from the richly varied programmes found in infant classrooms in New Zealand. As a community, we should regard reading with a relaxed smile rather than an anxious frown if we are to avoid creating the same problem for ourselves.

Another reference point: *developmental reading* is a term often heard these days and there are some important ideas implicit in it. First and foremost is the notion that becoming a reader is a continuous process. As our mastery of language and our ability to think in more and more abstract terms develop and become refined, so does our competence in reading increase. We grow in our ability to relate our experience and knowledge of the world to the author's meaning and ideas. We become more skilled in analyzing the conventions used by the authors of fairytales, sonnets, repair manuals, textbooks and doctoral theses. Our mastery of book language is ever increasing. The more familiar we are with the language of books, whether it be racy fiction, poetry, or highly technical prose, the easier it is to read more of that type.

All this suggests that we learn to read from having books read to us, and from reading ourselves. This is hardly a startling revelation but teachers intent on teaching reading or getting through an examination syllabus have often lost sight of these simple truths which are convincingly supported by research and also by common sense based on observation. It is not unlikely that if we do have a reading problem a major cause is to be found in lack of opportunity to read successfully in a wide range of interesting books. A British researcher, John Downing, has coined the term 'ex-literate' for those people whose reading skill has withered for want of use.

Becoming an efficient, effective and habituated reader is a long-term process. It seems clear then, that all teachers who use printed materials and who value reading for continued learning in school and beyond school have the vital role of facilitating and enhancing the interaction between reader and author. To do this with professional skill all teachers have to have some knowledge of how readers process print and what particular strategies are required to understand the author's design.

Regular periods of uninterrupted silent reading are becoming common in schools, both primary and secondary; everyone, including the teacher, reads for a whole period; students choose books from a wide selection of topics and levels of difficulty; occasionally there are opportunities to discuss books, to share interests and enthusiasms but 'You Learn To Read By Reading' is the motto and silent reading is the predominant activity. And in secondary schools, it is not just English teachers who are coming to value sustained silent reading as an integral part of the total learning programme. Social Studies, Science and other specialists are seeing the value of having an extensive selection of interesting material — fiction and non-fiction — which can be used in teaching their subjects. The thrust all the time is towards producing students who can read well and flexibly and who see reading as an important means for continuing their education, in the broadest sense, beyond the school gates. It is pertinent to reflect here that while a thorough international survey did show that our 14-year-olds topped the lists in reading comprehension and our most able senior secondary students were best in analyzing literature, this latter group were also found to be somewhat less than avid readers. Here again, perhaps we may be guilty of over-teaching.

Two further points should be stressed about the importance of allocating time for silent reading in school. Television viewing has encroached heavily into reading time and studies have shown that children are watching TV for many hours each day. Secondly, young people are told by everyone how important reading is, but they may not see anyone significant in their lives doing it! Hence it is important that teachers are seen to value reading, that they read themselves in the quiet reading period — a simple but potent teaching strategy in all classrooms in any subject. Again, research has shown that, consistent with principles of developmental learning, it is important to have a model of mature reading to emulate.

Shared Book Experience is another procedure which is gaining favour with teachers. A brief account may give the impression that it is simply a fancy way of reading a story to children, but it is in fact a powerful and sophisticated procedure. Initially it was for beginning readers who were making a slow start and was developed by one of this country's leading theorists and practitioners in the field, Don Holdaway, and a team of experienced junior class teachers. The technique now interests teachers at upper levels as well. In simplest terms the teacher reads *to* and *with* the learners; together they combine their prior knowledge, their language skills and their thinking ability to interact with the mind of the author, analyzing the devices he has used to communicate with them, grasping and reacting to his message and his purpose. A high degree of interest and involvement is maintained throughout. Many high-quality books are shared and enjoyed in this way and returned to with profit. And all the time the young students are increasing their ability to read with skill and discrimination.

This developmental emphasis suggests, then, that the teacher must do much more than throw the reader in at the deep end — 'Read this and there'll be ten questions to follow!' — while he gets on with his marking. Instead, the teacher exemplifies what mature readers do; he initiates learners into the arts and rewards of being a reader; he reads to them and with them and alongside them; and above all else he provides uninterrupted time for them to read. The teacher's role is crucial.

Much of traditional reading instruction has been based on assumptions which have only recently been seriously challenged with any real force. The recent shift has come from research in the disciplines of linguistics and developmental psychology. Instead of assuming that becoming a reader is a matter of being taught the letters and words and putting the bits and pieces together, researchers have systematically observed, recorded and analyzed what readers at all

ages, stages, and levels of proficiency actually do. The latest knowledge on the reading process is readily accessible and shows that much traditional practice was based on faulty and simplistic theory. In fact, it could be argued very convincingly that well-intentioned teaching based on some traditional beliefs has actually contributed to reading failure in some cases.

One assumption cherished by infant teachers has been the notion that learning to read depends mainly on what the teacher tells the child to do — if the children are not taught by the right methods with the right books then they won't learn to read. However, reading acquisition theory now suggests that children become readers in much the same way as they learn to talk. A strong case can be made for this point of view from learning theory, linguistics and from studies of children who have learned to read before going to school. An eminent theorist whose writings are well received in this country is Frank Smith. There is no doubt where he stands on this issue.*

> *Children cannot be taught to read.* A teacher's responsibility is not to teach children to read but to make it possible for them to learn to read. There is a difference. The real skills of reading, that have made readers out of you and me, are not skills that are formally taught at school or ever could be. We have acquired these skills only through reading. Most of the time we are not even aware of what these skills are, and they are certainly not explained in the majority of teacher-training institutions.

It seems then that even if one does not totally accept Smith's point of view, the initiative lies much more with the learner than was once thought. But what the teacher does is still important — probably even more so — if every child is to become a successful reader. The current New Zealand view of the role of the teacher is summarised in ERIC Booklet 12.†

> Improvement in the teaching of reading is not likely to result from preoccupation with a particular method or one set of materials. Significant gains are more likely to result from increased teacher knowledge of how children learn to read and from an awareness that the learner has a large amount of control over his own developing skill in reading. The learning-teaching situation is seen as a partnership. The child, through his own initiative, insight, developing skill and effort, becomes a reader. The skilled teacher facilitiates this process by:
>
> providing a programme which enables successful, independent learning to be sustained;
>
> systematically observing and recording the development of each child's reading;
>
> intervening appropriately as needs emerge.

The final reference point has been touched on several times — it is the need for all teachers at every level of the education system to understand what is involved in the act of reading.

Research

Two researchers stand out for what they have revealed about learning to read and the nature of the reading process. Quite independently, Marie Clay in New Zealand and Kenneth Goodman in the United States devised procedures for systematically recording and analyzing what children do when they read aloud. These research procedures have proved to be of great value for teachers, firstly, by enabling them to learn about the reading process and secondly, by providing techniques for analysing the strengths, difficulties and needs of that small proportion of children (about 5% to 7%) whose reading behaviour systems are not functioning smoothly. Teachers who learn to record and analyze reading behaviour using these research tools are much better attuned to what researchers and theorists have to say. This bridging of the gap between research and practice is an important outcome of the use of these research techniques in the classroom.

This reading behaviour approach fits readily into the New Zealand setting. The two people who did most to guide teachers along the right course in reading in this country were Ruth Trevor and Myrtle Simpson. Both were strong advocates of the value of learning about reading from observing what children do with text. Both carried the knowledge they gained from working with individual children in reading clinics in the 1940s and 50s into in-service training and the writing of handbooks. Ruth Trevor's description of reading as a process of using meaning to get meaning is quite consistent with current theory.

A clearer understanding of the reading process gained from research has led to shifts in the thinking and practice of teachers. As an example, Marie Clay's research has shown how young children often correct their own errors. They may repeat sentences, phrases or words as they search for, check and confirm responses by cross-relating cues from their knowledge of how language works, and from print detail. Knowing this, a teacher is much less likely to intervene at the point where a pause or an error is made, but instead allows time for the child to attempt to correct itself. The teacher encourages the child to use cues from more than one source, relating one to another, rather than to use one source of cues alone, such as letter-sound relationships. There is in fact evidence from various studies to show that children

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*Smith, Frank, Reading, Cambridge University Press, 1978.
†Department of Education, 1979.

making halting progress in reading often place too much reliance on the print alone.

The last sentence may puzzle. In fact, modern researchers and theorists place great emphasis on what the reader brings to the print — what Frank Smith calls 'non-visual information'. As a result there has been a shift of emphasis in teaching that seems rather like the application of good common sense, but which has taken the weight of research to bring about. Simply stated: the more one knows about a topic and the more familiar one is with the book language of the topic, the easier it is to read. It is not unusual to hear of secondary students who are described as poor readers who can read very difficult technical materials on, say, electronics or astronomy, because they have a passionate interest in learning more about the subject. Teachers at all levels are becoming much more aware of the necessity for building background before reading.

Teaching Reading Teaching

The theme of this survey article has been: much more is now known about reading, but the formidable task of finding the most effective means of transmitting this knowledge to teachers in classrooms still remains.

Much has already been done in the last 20 years. A large number of in-service courses on reading, have been held especially for primary teachers. They have been led by reading advisers and junior class advisers, specialist teachers, inspectors and teachers' college and university lecturers. Local councils of the International Reading Association have held ten national conferences involving outstanding people from the field from New Zealand and overseas and have also organized many workshops and seminars. Some universitites have offered courses with a reading component. The Department of Education's Advanced Studies for Teachers Unit has a Diploma in Teaching course on reading — a year long correspondence course — and a new paper 'Teaching Reading in the Secondary Classroom' will become available in 1980. If a criticism were to be made of in-service education in reading it would be that courses have often been too short, for too many people, and have lacked adequate follow-up. There is a trend now toward courses based in schools so that teachers from one school have the opportunity to participate together.

Four in-service projects in the reading field are notable because of the emphasis they give to continuous support for teachers while new knowledge and procedures are being acquired. The Early Reading Inservice Course (ERIC) was produced as the result of work in Auckland schools and is now available throughout the country. The course developers wanted to bring together the most relevant and recent knowledge about beginning reading and make it available to as many teachers as possible. In the ERIC programme, the best of New Zealand reading teaching is described and illustrated, and integrated with new knowledge from research — in particular, the work of Marie Clay. The locally developed teaching procedure, Shared Book Experience is explained and exemplified, and its place in a balanced reading programme is discussed, in particular its combination with proven techniques associated with the language experience approach and graded reading books such as our *Ready to Read* series. Apart from the content, the mode of the course is seen as being essential to its effectiveness. Eleven of the twelve units are made up of a tape-slide sequence and a booklet. Teachers take one unit per week at a centre. They work individually, at their own pace, and in their own time. Schools are encouraged to release all their junior class teachers during the same week. The booklets are used while listening to the tapes and contain information which is useful later when teachers are discussing and trying out the course content back in their schools. Trained resource teachers, junior class teachers knowledgeable about the ERIC ideas, are available to work alongside and support those on the courses. It is a colleague-to-colleague rather than an expert-to-general-practitioner sort of course.

An objective of the ERIC programme is the development of sound classroom practice — it is of vital importance that the first reading teaching a child gets should be as good as possible. If the teacher has a reading programme which caters for individual needs most children will succeed in learning to read, but a few will find it difficult. 'Remedial reading' has usually been provided for these children beginning at about the standard two level and often continuing into Secondary School. This is the pattern we have become accustomed to.

But now we have the possibility of a breakthrough — a change in the traditional pattern through the development of the Reading Recovery Programme: this is the culmination of fifteen years of intensive effort by Marie Clay. An outcome of her observational research was the publication of material which was designed to foster understanding of the reading process, to encourage sensitive observation of children's progress, and to provide for the early

detection of reading difficulty after one year of instruction. Having developed the means for early detection, Marie Clay worked with a small group of specialist teachers to devise teaching procedures to provide very early help for children in difficulty. Designed to supplement the classroom reading programme it is intensive, individual teaching, tailored to the competencies of each child. The goal is to accelerate progress so that children can operate successfully in the average level reading groups within their classroom. This year, 48 experienced junior class teachers from Auckland schools are being trained as Reading Recovery teachers. They tutor children daily while participating in a year long in-service course which involves attending fortnightly clinic sessions. It is expected that the experience gained from the project will lead to the provision of courses for Reading Recovery teachers throughout New Zealand. The development of this successful preventive programme brings the possibility of reducing the incidence of reading failure close to reality. This is an exciting prospect.

LARIC is a project designed to follow on from ERIC. The programme is being developed in Christchurch and the aim is to produce a course based on similar principles to ERIC, for teachers in the middle and upper primary school. A notable feature of the first stage of the project has been the observational research to gather base-line information. The questions being asked are: what is happening in classrooms in the name of reading instruction? and, what are pupils and teachers perceptions of reading? This research should prove valuable for a variety of purposes including the later evaluation of the impact of LARIC.

The shift to a developmental view of reading inevitably leads to the question of how teachers in secondary schools can gain the knowledge which will enable them to influence and guide students towards mature independent reading. A most promising development has been that two groups of secondary reading-resource teachers have trained in Wellington and Auckland in 1977 and 1978. These teachers were nominated by their schools for a two term course and are now working alongside colleagues in the classroom. The aim of this pilot project is improving reading across the curriculum.

Policy for secondary reading development was formulated in an article in *Education*, No. 1, 1975. Peter Boag, who was then Director of Secondary Education, discussed the state of reading in secondary schools and how improvement could be made. A strong case was made for the use of trained reading-resource teachers working with subject specialists. Work done in the schools has produced most promising results but this project is in its infancy. It is to be hoped that current economic strictures do not halt progress. When a country is running into more straitened times it needs citizens who are self-sufficient, resourceful and able to sustain their own education beyond school. Improving reading in secondary schools is part of our investment in a better future.

Concluding

So far in this survey article I have not discussed such important considerations as the role of parents. The more we come to understand about children learning to read, the greater is our appreciation of the influence of the home, both before a child goes to school and then through into secondary school. Parents do not need to teach teaching; they simply have to read to their children and be sharing readers themselves. The Department of Education has produced the film *Getting a Message* and also the highly regarded tape and booklet programme, *On the Way to Reading* to put parents in the picture.

We are making good progress in New Zealand and there is a clear understanding of what our priorities and lines of development should be. If we can reduce the anxiety level and increase knowledge, confidence and enthusaiasm about reading we should be able to sustain and even increase the high level of literacy which we now enjoy. However, we should be on guard against pre-occupation with questions about standards, testing and levels of attainment. Ultimately it is the *quality* of reading experience which will determine whether young people who leave school have the same view of reading as this seven year old boy:

'Reading is once you know it, you will do it for a life time.'

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